Cultural Diversity and Place Preservation

Setha M. Low

In this presentation I argue that the preservation of historic corridors is an important aspect of place preservation that can promote a culturally rich and diverse environment. Preserving cultural resources such as historic transportation corridors is based on the notion that the cultural landscape is valued and encodes important elements of our biophysical, social, and cultural history. Place is space made culturally meaningful, and in this sense provides both the context and symbolic cues for our everyday behavior and cultural activities. Thus, places are not just an environment, but an integral part of social interaction and cultural process. Without place preservation, the contexts for culturally meaningful behaviors disappear, cutting us off from our past, disrupting the present, and limiting the possibilities for the future.

Victorian summer cottage, Cape May, NJ. Photo by the author.

It is hard to imagine cultural behavior without its culturally-appropriate place. It's true, this can occur—we all create makeshift facsimiles of an ideal world; but try to picture Pueblo cultural life without the richness of Pueblo architecture or the difficulty of socializing your children without a home. We grieve when we experience the loss of place as has been documented for the residents of the West End of Boston or the shock of losing Penn Station for New York City residents. The loss of place is not just the architectural loss, but the cultural and personal loss in terms of what we as a society provide as meaningful environments of human action and expression. If we do not provide supportive environments, or at the very least, allow them to exist, we can actually eliminate the cultural diversity that we are trying to preserve. Place is critical to social and cultural reproduction and thus must be considered as part of our mission.

The practice of place preservation, however, is complex and often problematic—and particularly so when attempting to define and preserve a historic corridor—in that place is: politically as well as culturally constructed; pluralistic, reflecting a diversity of cultures; and constantly changing in that cultures are dynamic and fluid, and therefore cannot be frozen in time and space without endangering future cultural expressions. The moment that a move is made to conserve a historic corridor, a number of alternative political, social, and cultural uses of a location may be eliminated such that the ramifications of all such choices must be carefully examined and evaluated. Questions emerge about who is to judge the importance of a cultural resource, and who benefits or suffers with regard to the preservation or eradication of that resource. Even more importantly, the planning and design processes that are developed to implement historic corridor preservation often introduce problems and conflicts as well. I will outline some of the ways that preserving places presents new challenges and solutions in the remainder of this talk.

Politics

One important concern when discussing any kind of cultural or historic preservation is that labels and concepts such as culture or ethnicity are politically as well as culturally constructed and manipulated for a variety of ends. We are not dealing with static, definable attributes that can be measured or codified, but with definitions and identities that are negotiated, fluid, and context-dependent. Whether a group takes on a class-related identity, i.e., working class, or a culture-related identity, i.e., Italian American, or whether some groups are considered political entities at all certainly influences what is construed to be the meaning of a historical corridor. Further, cultural hegemony, that is the dominance of one cultural group's ideology and values over another, maintains the control of white, middle-class values over the very definitions of what can be considered a relevant group with the power to give its own meanings to local environments. Governmental officials, land use planners, landscape designers, private entrepreneurs, and myriad professionals who are involved in the creation and destruction of places are trained within an academic tradition that privileges "mainstream" middle-class ideas about place and group. These professionals maintain the authority and decisionmaking power to define how a place should look, but also des-

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ignate which group's inscriptions of place will be considered valid.

Another political issue is whether planning and design reinforce traditional power relations and conflicts of race, class, and gender as well as cultural inequality. These inequalities are expressed in the cultural and historic landscape through decisions that allocate space to those with political and/or economic power, while at the same time those without power lose their communities through development processes that favor one group over another or vested interests. The gentrification that has occurred in small towns and rural communities associated with their designation as historic landmarks and/or protected regions are examples of how planning decisions restructure the use as well as the allocation of space with a delirious impact on poor and disenfranchised residents.

Children playing in Farnham Park, Camden, NJ. Photo by the author.

A third political issue concerns our roles as professionals working with local communities. There are significant differences in professional verses local cultural control of historic preservation and design. The professional community of planners, designers, historians, and social scientists who provide the knowledge base for preservation and design guidelines do not necessarily value the same places as the local community. While professionals are trained to be spokespersons for local communities, design and planning education also espouses a set of professional culture beliefs and practices that limit communication and understanding. This breakdown in communication often goes unnoticed as the two groups use the same words and appear to speak the same language. For instance, I undertook a project in Oley, PA, where historic landscape designation had stripped the local residents' ability to define the landscape in their own terms. By developing a method to translate the languages of the architectural historians, designers, and the local community, communication about their different design goals and values was made possible.

Pluralism

The culture of a place is never singular, but made up of a cultural mosaic built upon a multiplicity of histories, voices and peoples. Whenever we talk about a historic corridor, we must ask the question "whose culture?" or "whose tradition or history?" in order to make clear even to others what or whom we are talking about. As I have mentioned in the discussion of cultural hegemony, some of these voices are never heard. Particularly in the United States it is difficult to think of a place as having a dominant culture because of the complex nature of our society. Yet the expression of this plurality is difficult to achieve, especially in terms of place where the demands of conflicting and contrasting taste cultures may dictate very different scenarios that are often mutually exclusive.

An example of mutually exclusive land uses is the conflict over the adaptive reuse of the Manayunk mill buildings in Philadelphia in the development of a historic canal pathway. The city and outside entrepreneurs wanted to use these buildings for restaurants and boutiques to attract tourists and new residents, while the local neighborhood wanted to use these sites to attract light industry back into the area. The demands of the local neighborhood were overlooked in the final planning process because of the incompatibility of industry with the gentrified shops and amenities. The historic corridor created by the reconditioned walkway along the canal and river was defined by outside conceptions of what should be represented rather than taking into consideration the needs and definitions of the local community.

Planning and design projects have a tendency to reduce rather than maintain cultural diversity. They also reduce the spectrum of cultural experience by designing for a targeted group of people or for a particular "look." An example of how diversity is limited is found in the similarity of Rouse's harbor developments in Boston, Baltimore and New York, that despite their regional external character contain the same shops, restaurants and services thus attracting the same tourists and middle-class locals regardless of the location. By targeting tourists and their preference for a "middle-class" experience, the otherwise economically invigorating projects limit the cultural diversity that is presented as well as the population invited to participate.

Cultural Change

The problems of politics and plurality refer to the privileging of one culture over another or not including all cultural groups in the determination of historic corridor designation, planning and design. But there is another even more serious problem facing us especially in terms of preserving historic corridors, and this is the reality that culture is not static, but is always changing. Cultural

groups are fluid; even the values and beliefs of traditional societies change dramatically over time. So when a corridor is designed, cultural elements are fixed in the physical environment that may have already changed, and no longer represent the people who live in or use that environment.

It is an ongoing dilemma and in this case preservation, planning, and design processes privilege the past yet the new is the tradition of the future. How do we preserve historic corridors through planning and design while acknowledging that culture changes and that the groups whose cultures are being expressed will change as well? I find this dilemma ironic, in that as we work to help a community save some aspect of the local environment, we are also precluding other choices that may better accommodate the future.

How then can we maintain cultural diversity and cultural sensitivity while identifying, defining, and preserving historic corridors? One possible solution is the development of methodologies that incorporate the cultural mosaic of communities. For instance, Randolph Hester (1984,1985) has developed a methodology for working with rural towns that includes the townspeople in the data collection and analysis phase in order to identify their own "sacred spaces." These sacred spaces then become a focus for the redesign and renovation of the community; the identified spaces are preserved and highlighted in the town masterplan, thus preserving the town's most culturally meaningful elements.

Another methodology that deals with cultural plurality is constituency analysis (Low 1981a, 1981b, 1985) used in a planning project of Farnham Park in Camden, NJ. Developed as part of a landscape architecture studio at the University of Pennsylvania, the methodology involves the segmentation of community members into subcultures, that is, groups that have differing opinions and values orientations on issues related to the redesign of the park. The community was thus segmented into over 10 distinct groups and plans were developed for their individual needs and desires. The final phase of the project integrated the different plans through a political negotiation process. The benefit of the method was that subculture diversity was maintained throughout the planning process, rather than being lost in the first phase when one group would normally have been selected to represent the whole.

Other preservation strategies use cultural symbols as a way to maintain a sense of cultural identity in the design and planning of a neighborhood. one example is the redesign of buildings and sidewalk details in Philadelphia's Chinatown where pagodas are found atop telephone booths. Chinese gates mark the entrance to the area, and buildings by Venturi have Chinese detailing on balconies and entrances. Symbols can add an important dimension to a project without necessarily excluding other uses of the space. So, although they are not a permanent way to preserve a place, they provide an intermediate level of maintaining cultural diversity and local community spatial identity.

Cultural re-interpretation in design, that is, the re-use of culturally important buildings for contemporary uses is still another strategy for preserving places while maintaining cultural diversity. In beach communities, such as Cape May, NJ, Victorian summer cottages are maintained and preserved by re-designing their interiors to accommodate rental use. Others have been turned into restaurants, guest houses and tourist shops. Cape May thus has been able to conserve its architectural heritage and cultural identity while providing diversity of use for a wider variety of people.

Local cultural adaptation, that is, design that provides cultural meanings through means that are ecologically and / or socioculturally adaptive are a final method for dealing with place preservation and cultural meaning. Cultural groups often transplant elements from their native environments to new locations that have pre-existing cultural traditions and incompatible environments. In some cases, the newly-introduced cultural elements can have a deleterious effect on the environment such as the desire to have water-dependent grass lawns in Tucson, AZ. A local cultural adaptation that responds both to the ecological problem of water shortages and the desire to maintain the cultural symbol is the emergence of green rock front lawns or cement front lawns painted green. These clever adaptations of the original symbolic form reconstituted within the constraints of the local environment suggest how cultural forms can survive even in hostile surroundings.

Conclusion

I would like to emphasize three points:

- Maintaining cultural diversity in the landscape is an inseparable part of preserving historic corridors, but entails designation, planning, and design decisions that generate a new set of problems to be considered.
- These problems—the political, pluralistic, and changeable qualities of culture and cultural groups—must be attended to in order to produce more informed preservation decisions.
- There are many solutions including methodological, symbolic, and interpretation strategies that may help to maintain the cultural diversity that is so important to our cultural heritage.

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Dr. Setha M. Low is a professor of Environmental Psychology and Anthropology in the Graduate School and University Center of the City University of New York.